
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues
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BUYING A USED CAR

If your dream car is a luxury model but you can only afford a standard model, buying a **used** luxury model might be the way to make your dream come true. It is possible to get a model that is just two or three years old for up to 30 percent less than you would pay for a new car. A newer model used car still has most of its useful life ahead and can often operate for 150,000 miles or more.

There are other advantages:

- Prices of used cars have been low because of the abundant flow of vehicles coming off lease.
- Safety features such as air bags and antilock brake systems have been standard in most models for several years, so you don't have to compromise safety to get a bargain.
- You will save on insurance, too – premiums are lower for theft and collision coverage because it is related to total replacement value.
- The vehicle may still be covered by the factory or other extended warranty.

If you do some homework first you can make sure your dream car doesn't turn into a nightmare.

First make a stop at your local library to check car buying guidebooks and consumer magazines for information on performance, safety and price. Service records can tell you what problems you might expect from a particular type of used car. Make a list of questions you have about features, warranties, or service.

While at the library, check the National Automobile Dealers Association (N.A.D.A.) Used Car Price Guide, commonly called the "blue book" for the value of the used car you might buy as well as the value of the car you presently own. You can also find this information online at www.nadaguides.com. You can review the Kelley Blue Book Official Guide online at www.kbb.com for used car values. This way, you will have an idea of the price you can expect to pay if you plan to negotiate a trade-in.

When test driving the car, take it to a mechanic you know and trust and ask the mechanic to check the car over for any major repairs the car may need now or in the near future. Before signing anything you will want to know if the vehicle has been involved in an accident, has major body damage, or has another secret in its past. You can take the car to a body shop for inspection and, for a small fee, obtain a complete history of the vehicle from www.carfax.com.

Consumers should be cautious about vehicles that may have been damaged in Hurricane Katrina and then salvaged and resold in North Dakota. You can obtain, free of charge, a flood car report from www.carfax.com/flood. This website indicates whether a vehicle was last registered in a state subject to a Federal Emergency Management Assistance disaster declaration. You can also check with the North Dakota Motor Vehicle Department at 701-328-2725 to determine if that agency has information on the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN), indicating the vehicle title is “branded” as a damaged vehicle. However, even these precautions may not guarantee the vehicle is free from flood or other damage. If you suspect flood damage may be an issue, have a trusted mechanic check the vehicle for hidden signs of damage from flooding or other causes.

However, neither of these two record checks on the vehicles VIN will guarantee the vehicle has not been damaged by flood or other vehicle damage.

You have chosen the car and negotiated a price. Now it is time to tackle the maze of paperwork. Take your time and read everything carefully. Always be sure you know what you are signing. Double-check the figures shown on the contract to make sure the amounts are what you agreed to pay and question anything you do not understand. Before signing complete or cross out any blank spaces.

Remember, under current state law, when purchasing a used car in North Dakota you purchase it “as is” unless you purchase a warranty separately or a warranty is specifically included in the price. Be sure to get warranties and all promises of repair **in writing**. Again, be sure you read and understand any agreement or contract before you sign it.

When it comes to used cars, searching for the best deal for your money can be both intimidating and confusing. Doing your homework first and reading all contracts carefully will help you get a good deal – and let you drive home your dream.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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